

# Learning to Lead: J. Lawton Collins' Mastery of Large-Unit Command

A Monograph

by

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## **Abstract**

Learning to Lead: J. Lawton Collins' Mastery of Large-Unit Command, by MAJ Alphonse J. LeMaire III, 53 pages.

This monograph outlines a portrait of J. Lawton Collins' career to determine what common factors prepared him for becoming an effective large-unit commander. The goal is to illustrate the importance of professional military education, mentorship from senior leaders, and leadership experiences with the training and development of large-unit/operational level commanders. This monograph accomplishes this by examining factors such as Collins' extended service in the interwar US Army school system, mentorship from George Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower, and Omar Bradley, and combat command experiences during the Guadalcanal Campaign, and the capture of Cherbourg. Upon completion of the following events, it becomes evident that Collins masters commanding large-units in combat. This monograph further illustrates this evidence through Collins' actions and decisions while commanding VII Corps during Operation Cobra, and in the Ardennes during the Battle of the Bulge. By determining how Collins compiled and progressed the necessary skills to become an effective large-unit commander, this research promotes how the contemporary US Army can implement similar systems or approaches with developing its operational level leaders.

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## **Acronyms**

ADRP	Army Doctrinal Reference Publication
AEF	American Expeditionary Force
BG	Brigadier General
CC	Combat Command
CGSC	Command and General Staff College
CGSS	Command and General Staff School
FSR	Field Service Regulations
LTG	Lieutenant General
MG	Major General
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SHAEF	Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force
US	United States
USMA	United States Military Academy
V-E Day	Victory in Europe Day

## **Illustrations**

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## Introduction

We might start in with a plan, but . . . the enemy would step in and do something that we did not quite anticipate and force a change. [Commanders] have to be ready to shift accordingly.

—Collins, “Conversations with General J. Lawton Collins,” May 17, 1983

On December 24, 1944, Major General J. Lawton Collins ordered a risky attack that violated the intent of his most recent orders.<sup>1</sup> As the German army advanced against Allied forces through the Ardennes, British Field Marshall Bernard L. Montgomery ordered Collins’ VII Corps to “go on the defensive with the objective of stabilizing the [southern] flank of the First United States (US) Army.”<sup>2</sup> However, recent reports from Collins’ western most subordinate unit, Major General (MG) Ernest N. Harmon’s 2nd Armored Division, reported that elements of the *2nd Panzer Division* were stalled in a wooded area near the town of Celles and apparently short of fuel.<sup>3</sup> Despite Montgomery’s order to defend the area, he had not explicitly forbid attacking—though the intent of his orders were clear.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, as Collins studied the enemy situation, he thought of a lecture he presented on the First Battle of the Marne while serving as an instructor at the US Army Infantry School seventeen years earlier.<sup>5</sup> This lecture analyzed the actions of a German field army commander, who chose to follow orders to withdraw rather than exploiting

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<sup>1</sup> Harold R. Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge: Six American Generals and Victory in the Ardennes* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 271.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>3</sup> J. Lawton Collins, *Lightning Joe: An Autobiography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 287.

<sup>4</sup> H. Paul Jeffers, *Taking Command: General J. Lawton Collins from Guadalcanal to Utah Beach and Victory in Europe* (New York: New American Library, 2009), 168.

<sup>5</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 289; Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 273.

French weakness by attacking. This failure led to a French victory in one of World War I's most decisive battles.<sup>6</sup>

Guided by his understanding of military history, intuition, and a sound estimate of the situation, Collins identified the vulnerability of the *2nd Panzer Division* and decided to attack without waiting for Montgomery's approval. By directing Harmon's 2nd Armored Division to counterattack near Celles, VII Corps nearly annihilated the *2nd Panzer Division*, halting the German advance towards the Meuse River, and contributing to their eventual defeat in the Battle of the Bulge.<sup>7</sup> With his bold actions in the Ardennes, "Collins had staked out a reputation as . . . perhaps the most effective [large-unit] commander in the European theater."<sup>8</sup>

Long before arriving in the Ardennes at this level of command mastery, Collins honed his abilities through education, mentorship, and combat experiences. In fact, he was a rare commanding officer who spent sixteen of his twenty-seven year career in the educational environment. The modern US Army values experience over education, and would consider this type of career progression insufficient for developing effective large-unit commanders. So how did Collins become one the most successful large-unit commanders of World War II? He harnessed and nurtured his ability to command through an extended combination of professional military education, mentorship from senior commanders, and previous battlefield command experiences to become one of World War II's most effective large-unit commanders.

The Ardennes counterattack was one of many examples of Collins' ability to understand situations, visualize necessary actions, and direct large-units to accomplish missions. Large-unit leadership during World War II is roughly equivalent to what the contemporary US Army calls

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<sup>6</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 289.

<sup>7</sup> United States Army, *Mission Accomplished: The Story of the Campaigns of the VII Corps, United States Army in the war against Germany, 1944-1945*. (Leipzig: J.J. Weber, 1945), 44.

<sup>8</sup> Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 57.

operational leadership. Operational leadership is the mid-level interface between high-level strategy and lower level tactics. It possesses the responsibility of keeping the two functions linked with one another to accomplish strategic objectives. Operational level commanders must provide purpose, direction, and motivation for their organizations, and ensure their tactical actions succeed to accomplish the overall strategic aims.<sup>9</sup>

Collins began his career as a confident, bold, aggressive, and intuitive leader who developed an art of command through a lengthy tenure in the interwar US Army school system. He developed these traits through education and experiences enabling him to understand situations, visualize solutions, and direct required actions to accomplish tough missions. These leadership attributes combined with precise battlefield intuition are concurrent with what Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz described as *coup d'oeil*, or “the mind’s eye.”<sup>10</sup> According to Clausewitz, *coup d'oeil* is a commander’s “ability to see things simply, to identify the whole business of war completely with himself, [and is undeniably] the essence of good generalship.”<sup>11</sup>

Before entering combat for the first time in 1943, Collins nurtured his leadership traits through over twenty-five years of professional military education, mentorship, and professional experience. Collins was a graduate of the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point in April 1917. Following graduation, he served in command positions at both company and battalion levels rising to the temporary rank of major in post-World War I Germany. Collins reverted to the rank of captain, and returned to the United States in 1921 only to begin a long-term educational process that helped shape him as an effective large-unit commander.

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<sup>9</sup> Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0: *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2012), 3-2.

<sup>10</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 578; Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: University Press, 2007), 112.

<sup>11</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 578.

Collins embarked on a sixteen-year venture as a student and instructor in the US Army's school system.<sup>12</sup> This interwar education included assignments as a chemistry instructor at West Point, a student at both the infantry and field artillery company officer's courses, and instructor duties at the US Army Infantry School. It was during this instructor assignment when the school's Deputy Commandant, Colonel George C. Marshall, noticed Collins' abilities, and would mentor him for greater responsibilities in the future.<sup>13</sup> Following his duties at the US Army Infantry School, Collins' professional military education continued as a student at the two-year version of the Command and General Staff School (CGSS). After graduating CGSS, he briefly served with the active force in the Philippines before returning to the school system to attend the Army Industrial College. Upon completing the Army Industrial College, Collins transitioned into the Army War College where he served as a student and instructor prior to the United States' involvement in World War II. This extensive educational foundation was a primary influence on his ability to command large-units. Collins emphasized this educational influence stating, "The school system made an army for us."<sup>14</sup>

With the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor thrusting the United States into World War II, Collins soon found himself assigned as the Chief of Staff for the Hawaiian Department. Due to steadfast performance, he quickly rose to the rank of major general and assumed command of the 25th Infantry Division. Collins provided a confident, bold, and aggressive leadership style while commanding the "Tropic Lightning" Division through a very

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<sup>12</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 42.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>14</sup> Gary Wade, "Conversations with General J. Lawton Collins" (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 1983), 3-4.

successful Guadalcanal Offensive in 1943. It was during this campaign when Collins received the nickname “Lightning Joe” for his highly personal, influential, and aggressive leadership style.<sup>15</sup>

After proving his value as an effective large-unit commander in the Pacific, and with Marshall’s endorsement, General Dwight D. Eisenhower selected Collins to command VII Corps in the European Theater just prior to the Invasion of Normandy. With this assignment Collins became one of only three generals to command large-units in both the Pacific and European Theaters of War.<sup>16</sup> He distinguished himself as an effective corps commander during Operation Overlord with the decisive capture of Cherbourg; however, Collins’ mastery of large-unit command became evident through his *coup d’oeil* while commanding VII Corps during Operation Cobra and in the Ardennes.

This monograph explores a portion of Collins’ career beginning with his return from post-World War I Europe. The first section, “The Garrison Classroom,” examines Collins’ enduring service in the interwar US Army school system and the mentorship he received from Marshall. It summarizes how both influenced his development as a leader, and led to him becoming one of the US Army’s youngest large-unit commanders in World War II. The second section, “The Battlefield Classroom,” outlines Collins’ initial combat experiences as a large-unit commander leading the 25th Infantry Division at Guadalcanal, and commanding the VII Corps on the capture of Cherbourg in Europe. The final section, “Battlefield Genius,” details two specific examples displaying Collins’ mastery of large-unit command: Operation Cobra, and the Ardennes Counterattack. Overall, this monograph outlines how a combination of professional military

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<sup>15</sup> Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants: The Campaign of France and Germany 1944-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 99.

<sup>16</sup> Wade, “Conversations with General J. Lawton Collins,” 6; Thomas Ricks, “Who was the tougher World War II enemy, the Germans or the Japanese?” *foreignpolicy.com*, last modified June 9, 2010, accessed February 19, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/09/who-was-the-tougher-world-war-ii-enemy-the-germans-or-the-japanese/>; Major Generals Eugene M. Landrum and Charles H. Corlett were the other two US Army large-unit commanders to fight in both the Pacific and European Theaters.

education, senior leader mentorship, and combat command experiences led to Collins' development as one of the US Army's most effective large-unit commanders during World War II.

## **The Garrison Classroom: Collins' Interwar Education and Leadership Development**

The world has marveled at the remarkable wartime successes of [America's] . . . Officer Corps in meeting time and again the demand of conflict in defense of our nation. The answer . . . lies in our superb Army School System . . .

—Collins speech to the Command and General Staff College, July 25, 1951

The interwar US Army school system used lessons developed from professional experiences in World War I to prepare its mid-grade officers for the next war.<sup>17</sup> To develop a professional officer corps the US Army school system applied the Clausewitzian proposition that, “The ultimate purpose of education . . . consisted not in the transmission of technical expertise but in the development of independent judgment.”<sup>18</sup> This educational approach enabled the US Army to develop flexible and adaptive leaders who applied independent judgment towards their decision-making.<sup>19</sup> Collins is one of many officers who benefitted from the interwar US Army school system that historian Michael Matheny credits with “provid[ing] officers the invaluable opportunity to study their profession and develop into competent planners and leaders.”<sup>20</sup> Collins’ initial experience in the US Army school system came as a chemistry instructor at West Point from 1921-1925. Following this assignment, he took the first step of creating a solid foundation of professional military education by attending the company officer’s course at the US Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia.

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<sup>17</sup> Michael R. Matheny, *Carrying the War to the Enemy: American Operational Art to 1945* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 269.

<sup>18</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Matheny, *Carrying the War to the Enemy*, 267-269.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

## US Army Infantry and Field Artillery Schools

The US Army Infantry School focused on leadership fundamentals, organization, tactics, and techniques developed after World War I, and is where Collins developed the foundation for his leadership style. Additionally, this training helped fill some gaps in Collins' military knowledge of recent developments that occurred while he taught chemistry at West Point for four years.<sup>21</sup> The infantry school's concept for leadership and command came from the *Field Service Regulations, United States Army, 1923 (FSR 1923)* that emphasized, "Command and leadership are inseparable."<sup>22</sup> It further detailed the US Army's concept of command specifying that commanders must maintain close personal contact with their subordinate units to understand the conditions, environment, and the soldiers' needs, views, and accomplishments.<sup>23</sup> Only through personal leadership, can commanders accurately assess situations, provide assistance, and ensure the application of necessary efforts towards mission accomplishment. This concept of command is similar to modern US Army's concept of personal command referenced as the "art of command."<sup>24</sup> As defined by contemporary US Army doctrine "the art of command is the creative and skillful exercise of authority by commanders through decision-making and leadership."<sup>25</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 44.

<sup>22</sup> War Department, Chief of Staff. *Field Service Regulations, United States Army, 1923* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1923), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Doctrinal definitions from *FSR 1923*: "In the practice of his task, the commander must keep in close touch with all subordinate units by means of personal visits and observation; it is essential that he know from personal contact the mental, moral, and physical state of his troops, the conditions with which they are confronted, their accomplishments, their desires, their needs, and their views, and that he promptly extend recognition for services well done, extend help where help is needed and give encouragement in adversity, but never hesitate to exact whatever effort is necessary to attain the desired end. Considerate and devoted to those whom he commands, he should be faithful and loyal to those who command him."

<sup>24</sup> Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0: *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2012), 2-11.

<sup>25</sup> ADRP, *Unified Land Operations*, 2-11. Art of Command, 2-53: "Decisionmaking skills refer to the ability to select a course of action as the one most favorable to accomplish the



infantry school grounded Collins with the leadership fundamentals that would inspire his command style and facilitate how he led his large-units in combat during World War II.

In addition to filling his knowledge gaps, Collins established a long-lasting friendship with Major Courtney Hodges who served as the US Army Infantry School's marksmanship instructor. This became an important relationship, as Collins would serve under Hodges' command in the European Theater beginning in the late summer of 1944. Upon graduating from the US Army Infantry School, Collins received the opportunity to attend an additional branch specific school before returning to Fort Benning for his assignment as an instructor. He sought advice on this opportunity from his older brother James. James argued that officers who focus on one specialty limit their versatility. Collins followed James' guidance and took this opportunity to attend the US Army Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.<sup>26</sup>

The field artillery school trained officers on artillery capabilities and limitations increasing Collins' efficiency with the tactical employment of fire support. Collins learned valuable lessons on the employment of infantry and artillery combined arms, and terrain analysis that proved significant sixteen years later while fighting in the South Pacific jungles. Fort Sill's terrain was generally flat and wide-open so most of the school's forward observers remained in observations posts located well behind the forward line of supported troops while conducting gunnery training. Collins thought that this procedure would lead to insufficient coordination between infantry and artillery units in combat, hampering effective combined arms tactics.<sup>27</sup>

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mission. Commanders apply knowledge to the situation thus translating their visualization into action. Decisionmaking includes knowing whether to decide or not, when and what to decide, and the consequences. Commanders understand, visualize, describe, and direct to determine and communicate their commander's intent, concept of operations, commander's critical information requirements, and desired end state."

<sup>26</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 45-47.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

This lesson taught Collins that to get the most out of combined arms maneuver he needed to integrate forward observers with infantry units to maximize accurate and efficient supporting fires. Collins employed forward observers this way in the 25th Infantry Division while preparing them for combat in 1942. Combined arms efficiency became a substantial benefit once fighting in the rugged jungle terrain of Guadalcanal.<sup>28</sup> Collins greatly valued his education from the US Army Field Artillery School learning several important lessons that aided him as an instructor at the infantry school, but more importantly with preparing and employing combined arms maneuver with large-units in combat.<sup>29</sup>

#### Instructor at the US Army Infantry School

Collins returned to Fort Benning to serve as an instructor at the US Army Infantry School after graduating from the field artillery school. This assignment enhanced his tactical problem solving abilities, and due to impressive performances, he came under the watchful eye of the school's Deputy Commandant Colonel Marshall.<sup>30</sup> As noted by one of Collins' future commanders, Omar N. Bradley, "Marshall kept a close eye on all officers passing through the school, personally selecting or approving all officers who served on the school faculty."<sup>31</sup> Marshall became an influential mentor to Collins and his peers by revising the instruction and teaching methods at the infantry school. Marshall's approach encouraged instructors and students

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<sup>28</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 137-138.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>31</sup> Omar N. Bradley, Clay Blair, *A General's Life: An Autobiography by General of the Army Omar N. Bradley and Clay Blair* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 6.

to think critically and develop original and creative solutions for tactical problems.<sup>32</sup> If one of their solutions made sense, Marshall had it presented to the entire class.<sup>33</sup>

Marshall developed critical, innovative, and intuitive thinkers and decision-makers while at the infantry school. With the emergence of automatic weapons, tanks, mechanized, and air forces, future warfare had become much more complicated. Marshall based his critical, innovative, and intuitive thinking approach on an argument from *Infantry in Battle* stating that, “The art of war has no traffic with rules . . . infinitely varied circumstances and conditions of combat never produce the same situation twice.”<sup>34</sup> Based on this concept, Marshall encouraged young leaders to assess variables like the mission, enemy, terrain, weather, and friendly disposition when developing problem-solving approaches. Collins remarked that under Marshall, “the spirit at Benning . . . was a marvelous thing . . . because if anybody had any new ideas [Marshall] was willing to try.”<sup>35</sup> This educational approach had a profound impact on intuitive thinking and decision-making abilities of the officers involved. This capacity enhanced an officer’s *coup d’oeil*, which eventually became the skillset distinguishing Collins from his peer commanders in World War II.

The most substantial project Collins accomplished as an instructor was the revision of a new infantry drill system. Marshall specifically tasked Collins to develop a new US Army drill system based on an improved French drill system.<sup>36</sup> Collins drafted a revised drill system that

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<sup>32</sup> Bradley and Blair, *A General’s Life*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> C.T. Lanham, *Infantry in Battle* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), 1.

<sup>35</sup> Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Education of a General 1880-1939* (New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1964), 256.

<sup>36</sup> Pogue, *George C. Marshall*, 268.

Marshall recommended to the Chief of Infantry, and published in the *Infantry Journal* in 1931.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, Collins' new drill system sat at the War Department for seven years until Marshall became the Deputy Chief of Staff in 1938. Marshall took the necessary steps to get it adopted just prior to America's involvement in World War II.<sup>38</sup>

Of all the men Marshall mentored and coached while at Fort Benning, Collins emerged as one of the best and brightest. One of Marshall's evaluations of Collins at Fort Benning suggested that he "has a bright mind and a natural aptitude for logical and constructive thinking."<sup>39</sup> Marshall and the infantry school's influence on Collins helped advance an already confident, bold, aggressive, and intuitive thinker, who learned how to command complex forces that became the trademark of US Army large-units during World War II. The impression Collins made on Marshall would earn him distinguished large-unit command opportunities once the United States entered World War II.

#### Command and General Staff School

In 1931, Collins received orders to attend the highly selective CGSS at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.<sup>40</sup> The purpose of CGSS was to train mid-grade officers in the combined use of all arms, and the functions of commanders and general staff officers at the division and corps echelons.<sup>41</sup> During Collins' tenure, CGSS expanded to a two-year course with the first year

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<sup>37</sup> J. Lawton Collins, "A New Infantry Drill," *Infantry Journal*, Volume XXXVIII, July-August 1931 (Harrisburg: Government Printing Office); Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 54.

<sup>38</sup> Pogue, *George C. Marshall*, 268. Marshall published Collins' drill in the FM 22-5, Basic Field Manual, Infantry Drill Regulations, 1939.

<sup>39</sup> Efficiency report for 1 July 1928-30 June 1929, Collins file, National Personal Records Center, quoted in Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Jeffers, *Taking Command*, 22.

<sup>41</sup> United States Army Command and General Staff College Library, *A Military History*

focused on large-unit combined arms tactics, and the second year devoted to logistics and sustainment of large-units.<sup>42</sup> The CGSS purpose was to prepare US Army officers for future war by arming them with the tactical principles based on a framework of stabilized fronts, and mobile warfare from the World War I Army Expeditionary Force (AEF) experience.<sup>43</sup> This post-World War I doctrine focused on the role of the commander, offensive combined arms maneuver, and large-unit sustainment operations. Most CGSS classrooms became the primary setting for officers to think about and plan for the United States' future wars. The learning, understanding, and practicing of these subjects had a profound impact on cultivating Collins' ability to command and control large-units in combat. Although the CGSS approach was a less innovative climate than Marshall's infantry school, Collins believed the teaching and evaluation of learning was invaluable, "It was at Leavenworth that Eisenhower and Bradley, and [most of us] senior commanders . . . learned the techniques of large-units."<sup>44</sup>

Collins additionally credits reading military history as one of the key sources preparing him for command in combat. While at CGSS Collins picked up an old hobby of reading military history, claiming that, "If you really want to learn your trade, you couldn't do any better than studying [military history] . . . and I got a good deal out of the good ones."<sup>45</sup> Collins graduated CGSS ranked twenty-second out of a class of one hundred twenty-five.<sup>46</sup> He matured his

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*of the US Army Command and General Staff College, 1881-1963* (Fort Leavenworth: US Army Command and General Staff College), 28-29.

<sup>42</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 57.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Schifferle, *America's School for War: Fort Leavenworth, Officer Education, and Victory in World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 189.

<sup>44</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 57.

<sup>45</sup> Wade, "Conversations with General J. Lawton Collins," 2.

<sup>46</sup> Robert H. Berlin, *US Army World War II Corps Commanders* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 1989) 11.

understanding, judgment, and decision-making abilities throughout the two-year CGSS course. Upon graduation, Collins returned to the active force for three years serving as a brigade executive officer and assistant division chief of staff in the Philippines before returning to another professional school.

### Army Industrial and War Colleges

Collins returned to the US Army school system in 1937 to attend the Army Industrial College. The Army Industrial College began in 1924 to train predominantly supply service officers on the production and procurement of munitions. Having a limited background in sustainment and production training, this education greatly broadened Collins' robust skillset further preparing him for how to sustain large-units in combat.<sup>47</sup>

After graduation, Collins remained in Washington, DC to attend the Army War College. The Army War College covered the political and economic aspects in conjunction with military considerations involved in wartime mobilization.<sup>48</sup> Collins biggest takeaway from the Army War College was the collaborative climate between students and instructors remarking that, "No one pretended that the instructors knew more about a given subject than the students."<sup>49</sup> Instructors gave students an issue with a specified time limit to solve the problem before presenting their solutions. Collins was an impressive student, characterized by the Commandant, MG John L. DeWitt, as being "broadminded; original independent thinker, with active imagination."<sup>50</sup> Due to

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<sup>47</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 86-87.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>50</sup> Efficiency report for 16 August 1937-30 June 1938, Collins file, National Personal Records Center, quoted in Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 54.

his solid performance as a student, the Army War College selected him to remain on the faculty and serve as an instructor following graduation.<sup>51</sup>

As an Army War College instructor, Collins served in the school's War Plans Division lecturing on large-unit offensive operations in combat.<sup>52</sup> His two most prominent lectures were, "The Concentration of Large Units" and "The Army and Large Units in Offensive Combat," lectures he would soon practice and master in combat. After the stunning fall of France, the US Army suspended the War College in June 1940 to prepare for a potential entry into the war. Reflecting back, Collins strongly acknowledges how "[the Army School System] saved the American Army—no question about it in my judgment."<sup>53</sup>

In September 1939, Marshall became the Chief of Staff of the Army. Collins had maintained professional correspondence with Marshall since their service together at Fort Benning, and he requested Collins be placed on temporary duty with the Secretariat of the General Staff office once the Army War College was suspended. This assignment enabled Collins to work in a group of high caliber officers who directly assisted Marshall with his decisions and recommendations.<sup>54</sup> Marshall kept a record of inner circle officers, known as "Marshall's men," many with whom he worked with while the Deputy Commandant at the US Army Infantry School.<sup>55</sup> According to Marshall's biographer Forrest Pogue, "when in 1940 and 1941 [Marshall] looked for division and corps commanders, he knew intimately scores of officers who had

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<sup>51</sup> Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 54.

<sup>52</sup> J. Lawton Collins, "The Concentration of Large Units," Lecture delivered at the Army War College, 1 March 1940, Army Military History Institute, and "The Army and Large Units in Offensive Combat," Lecture delivered at the Army War College, 8 March 1939, Army Military History Institute, quoted in Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 54.

<sup>53</sup> Wade, "Conversations with General J. Lawton Collins," 3-4.

<sup>54</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 95.

<sup>55</sup> Pogue, *George C. Marshall*, 269.

worked with him at Benning and who valued the same essentials of battle leadership.”<sup>56</sup> In addition to Collins, this group of officers included future generals Bradley, Matthew B. Ridgway, Manton S. Eddy, and James A. Van Fleet, each of whom Collins would either serve under, with, or command during combat in the European Theater.<sup>57</sup> Along with his extensive stint in the US Army school system, Marshall’s influence on Collins was a decisive factor with him becoming the youngest and one of the brightest US Army large-unit commanders during World War II.

Collins worked with the General Staff secretariat until January 1941, and then with Marshall’s endorsement, he became the VII Corps Chief of Staff. His primary duties as the Chief of Staff was training and preparing large-units for combat. Collins performed these duties admirably when in December 1941 he received unexpected orders to serve as the Chief of Staff for the Hawaiian Department. As Chief of Staff for the Hawaiian Department Collins’ principle focus was on Hawaii’s ground defenses. Due to his efficiency as chief of staff preparing large-units for combat, Collins earned promotion to major general and assumed command of the 25th Infantry Division in May 1942.<sup>58</sup> After taking command of the 25th Infantry Division, Collins spent the next six months preparing them for combat prior to receiving orders to deploy to Guadalcanal. Guadalcanal would be Collins’ fist combat experience, and a key developmental stage into becoming an effective large-unit combat commander.

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<sup>56</sup> Pogue, *George C. Marshall*, 269.

<sup>57</sup> Berlin, *US Army World War II Corps Commanders*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 95-99, 117-118, 134.



## **The Battlefield Classroom: Collins' Large-Unit Combat Command Development**

The leader who is afraid to get up front . . . afraid to take the same chances as his men, is never going to get anywhere at all.

—Collins speech to the Command and General Staff College, April 15, 1949

### **Guadalcanal Offensive**

In November 1942 Collins and his 25th Infantry Division, consisting of the 27th, 35th, and 161st Infantry Regimental Combat Teams,<sup>59</sup> departed Hawaii for Guadalcanal to relieve the battle hardened 1st Marine Division. The US Army assigned the 25th Infantry Division under the newly established XIV Corps, commanded by MG Alexander M. Patch, who was a direct subordinate of Admiral William F. “Bull” Halsey, commander of the South Pacific Area. Halsey issued orders for XIV Corps to “eliminate all Japanese forces” on Guadalcanal.<sup>60</sup> With proficient mission, enemy, and terrain analysis, combined with forward leadership, Collins effectively led the 25th Infantry Division in clearing Guadalcanal of all enemy forces. During this offensive, he would also learn some tough lessons that he carried with him to avoid duplicating in future combat command situations. Guadalcanal became the initial test of Collins’ leadership abilities in combat, and he was efficient “without embarrassment . . . [so much so that the] division codename, *Lightning* became aptly associated with Collins himself.”<sup>61</sup>

The 25th Infantry Division received a mission to relieve the 132nd Infantry on Mount Austen, and prepare for follow on attacks to eliminate the remaining Japanese forces on

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<sup>59</sup> John J. McGrath, *The Brigade: A History, Its Organization and Employment in the US Army* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 2004), 54-55. The Regimental Combat Team was an infantry regiment augmented with a field artillery battalion, engineer and medical company, and signal platoon to establish a combined arms organization for particular missions.

<sup>60</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 147.

<sup>61</sup> Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 100.

Guadalcanal.<sup>62</sup> Collins began by conducting a series of reconnaissance flights over the island to study the terrain and best determine how to defeat the Japanese.<sup>63</sup> These reconnaissance flights included his assistant division commander, artillery commander, all regimental commanders, and the majority of the division staff and battalion commanders.<sup>64</sup> After their terrain analysis, Collins and his regimental commanders concluded that attacking from east to west with frontal assaults required soldiers to move through the extremely restrictive terrain of the Matanikau riverbed. Based on this analysis, they devised a sophisticated concept that emphasized seizing high ground, or the Mount Austen, Sea Horse, and Galloping Horse Ridges, to defeat the Japanese by avoiding frontal attacks (fig. 1).<sup>65</sup> Collins understood that if his units controlled the high ground they could easily fix and envelop Japanese forces into three pockets in the low ground to reduce their positions “more or less at leisure.”<sup>66</sup>

The 25th Infantry Division’s operational concept was for the 27th Infantry to pass through friendly reconnaissance elements and seize the Galloping Horse Ridges before clearing Japanese forces west across the Northwest Matanikau Fork and into the Kokumbona Area. The 35th Infantry task was to reduce the Gifu strongpoint, then maneuver southwest around Mount Austen and seize Sea Horse Ridge from the south. The 161st Infantry positioned into a central location to reinforce either regiment as the division reserve.<sup>67</sup> The division’s primary objectives

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<sup>62</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 148.

<sup>63</sup> Jeffers, *Taking Command*, 43.

<sup>64</sup> John Miller, *United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific, Guadalcanal: The First Offensive* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1949), 257.

<sup>65</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 150.

<sup>66</sup> Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 552.

<sup>67</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 150.

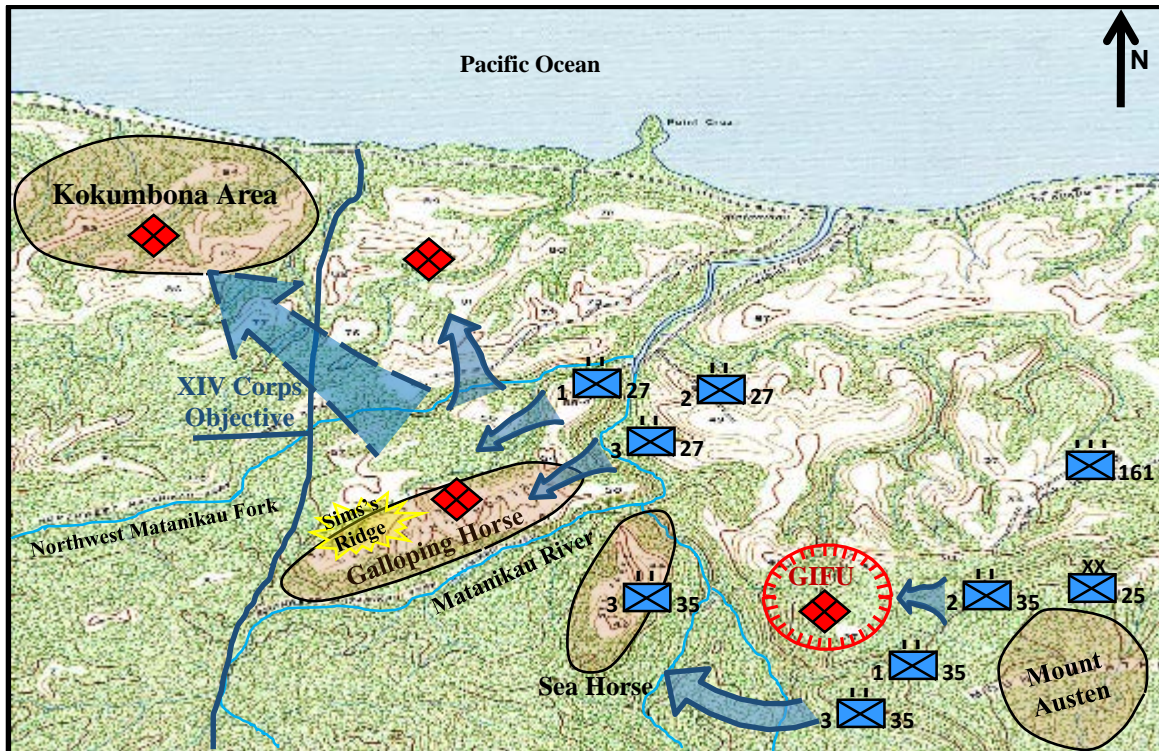


Figure 1. Guadalcanal, 25th Infantry Division Battle Area, January-February 1943.

Source: Adapted from John Miller, *United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific, Guadalcanal: The First Offensive* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1949), Map XXIII.

were to reduce the Gifu strongpoint, remove enemy pockets east of the Matanikau River, and seize high ground to prepare for an envelopment of the remaining Japanese forces in the Kokumbona Area (fig. 1). Collins established his command post on Mount Austen because it offered a clear view of the entire battlefield from Gifu all the way into the Kokumbona Area. Before beginning the mission on January 10, Collins indicated that both he and his soldiers “shared a mixture of trepidation and confidence” as they prepared for their first combat experience.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 151.

The operation began with the 27th Infantry “Wolfhounds” attacking to seize the Galloping Horse Ridge with its 1st and 3rd Battalions assaulting abreast, and the 2nd Battalion in reserve (fig. 1). 3rd Battalion experienced stiff resistance making little headway onto the Sims’ Ridge portion of Galloping Horse, whereas 1st Battalion faced lighter resistance while seizing its northwest portion by the end of the second day of battle (fig. 1).<sup>69</sup> On January 12, the 2nd Battalion moved up to replace the exhausted 3rd Battalion and continued the assault to seize Sims’ Ridge.<sup>70</sup> Collins understood how decisive this attack was for the division objective so he moved forward to position himself near the 2nd Battalion’s commander, Lieutenant Colonel Herbert V. Mitchell. “Where the crux of the fighting was . . . was the place I headed for.”<sup>71</sup> Collins’ words echo the command ideology he lectured to his students while at the Army War College, and practiced throughout the war.

By positioning himself forward at the 2nd Battalion command post, Collins was able to assist directing accurate mortar fire while controlling the main attack.<sup>72</sup> His forward command presence enabled Mitchell and his executive officer, Captain Charles W. Davis, to lead two separate maneuver elements; one that fixed an enemy strongpoint, the other enveloped and destroyed it. This two-element maneuver was critical to eliminate the final Japanese stronghold on Galloping Horse. For their successful attack and elimination of Japanese forces along Galloping Horse and Sims’s Ridge, Collins recommended both Mitchell and Davis for valor

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<sup>69</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 152-155; Miller, *Guadalcanal: The First Offensive*, 262-272.

<sup>70</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 152-155.

<sup>71</sup> Wade, “Conversations with General J. Lawton Collins,” 4. This document contains questions the author asked Collins during an interview on May 17, 1983. When asked about his command style Collins accentuated that good leaders must make valid estimates of the situation. To do this effectively Collins regularly visited subordinates and attempted to be near the critical points of action.

<sup>72</sup> Robert F. Karolevitz, *The 25th Infantry Division and World War II* (Nashville: Battery Press, 1946), 41.

awards. For their actions on the Galloping Horse battle, Mitchell received the Distinguished Service Cross while Davis received America's highest honor, the Congressional Medal of Honor.<sup>73</sup>

While the 27th Infantry assaulted the Galloping Horse Ridges, the 35th Infantry "Cacti" began their attack to reduce the Gifu strongpoint. Following the 27th Infantry attack, Collins linked up with the 35th Infantry's commander, Colonel Robert B. McClure to assess the situation at Gifu. While both men surveyed Gifu a soldier in a nearby foxhole called aloud, "By God, there is J. Lightning himself!" The 25th Infantry Division soldiers knew Collins by his signature on all division orders that read J. Lawton Collins, and his division radio call sign was "Lightning."<sup>74</sup> With notice of his leadership style spreading throughout the division during Guadalcanal, "J. Lightning" changed to "Lightning Joe," and became an appropriate nickname for his reputation in combat that stuck with him from that point forward. Collins was unaware of the nickname his soldiers branded him with until the Guadalcanal Campaign was complete.<sup>75</sup>

The Gifu strongpoint was a well-concealed and fortified position northwest of Mount Austen held by approximately five-hundred Japanese soldiers.<sup>76</sup> After an initial analysis of the terrain, Collins and McClure considered the possibility of using a double envelopment maneuver to reduce Gifu.<sup>77</sup> Their plan was to seal off Gifu's open west side while attacking simultaneously from high ground on both the north and south of Gifu. After further analysis, Collins decided that the rugged jungle terrain was too restrictive to risk such a complex maneuver. Despite wanting to

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<sup>73</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 155.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Frank, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle*, 531.

<sup>77</sup> Miller, *Guadalcanal: The First Offensive*, 292.

avoid a frontal attack, Collins made a judgment call and directed McClure to execute frontal attacks against Gifu from the east instead of a double envelopment.<sup>78</sup> In retrospect, Collins regretted his decision ordering frontal attacks against the Gifu strongpoint; however, he would carry this lesson with him and avoid duplicating it during the reduction of Cherbourg's defenses.<sup>79</sup>

On January 10, the 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry initiated the frontal assault to reduce Gifu. The regiment fought tenaciously over the next three days suffering fifty-seven casualties with limited success. Once 3rd Battalion successfully captured Sea Horse Ridge on January 13, the 35th Infantry had Gifu completely isolated. Collins then ordered the 35th Infantry to lay siege into Gifu over the next four days with the Japanese showing no signs of surrender. On January 17, Collins had his division prepare and broadcast surrender requests in both English and Japanese prior to committing additional attacks into Gifu. For over five days the 35th Infantry assaulted the resolute Japanese defenses when on January 22, with the assistance from three light Marine Corps tanks, they finally penetrated the defensive lines and defeated the remaining Japanese forces. The 35th Infantry cleared and held the Gifu position from January 22 -26, tallying forty machine guns, twelve mortars, 200 rifles, and 431 Japanese killed.<sup>80</sup>

By the end of the first week of February 1943, XIV Corps successfully killed or captured the remaining Japanese soldiers ending the Guadalcanal Campaign.<sup>81</sup> Under Collins' aggressive leadership style, the 25th Infantry Division led the way for XIV Corps, defeating Japanese forces in the battles of Galloping Horse, Sea Horse, Gifu, and into the Kokumbona Area. Admiral

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<sup>78</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 156.

<sup>79</sup> Frank, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle*, 564-567.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Karolevitz, *The 25th Infantry Division and World War II*, 46-49.

“Bull” Halsey pronounced his admiration of Collins and his “Tropic Lightning” Division’s significant actions on Guadalcanal asserting, “I am surprised and pleased at the speed with which he removed the enemy.”<sup>82</sup>

Throughout the summer, Collins continued to distinguish himself as one of the US Army’s most effective division commanders leading the 25th Infantry Division on successful actions during the New Georgia Campaign. In November 1943, the “Tropic Lightning” Division was withdrawn to New Zealand to recover and refit for future operations. In December, the commander of Army Forces in the South Pacific Area, MG Millard F. Harmon directed Collins to report to the War Department in Washington, DC for a debrief and a much needed vacation.<sup>83</sup> Collins departed New Zealand on December 2, 1943 not realizing he was leaving his beloved 25th Infantry Division for good.<sup>84</sup>

Upon arrival in Washington, Collins met with his old mentor, General Marshall, to debrief him on actions in the Pacific Theater and lobby for a corps command.<sup>85</sup> Marshall was impressed with Collins’ accomplishments as a division commander, but knew that the commander of the Southwest Pacific Area, General Douglas MacArthur, felt he was “too young” to command at the corps level. Collins informed Marshall before leaving that he would like a “crack at the European Theater,” to which Marshall calmly replied, “Maybe you will.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Jeffers, *Taking Command*, 53.

<sup>83</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 172-174. Collins informed Harmon that he had not seen his family in over two years and requested a brief visit to Washington, DC. Knowing he was not one of MacArthur’s men, one may argue that he had additional motives knowing Marshall was also in Washington, DC.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>85</sup> Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 55.

<sup>86</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 176.

As Eisenhower and Bradley prepared for Operation Overlord in Europe, they identified the need for combat experienced commanders to lead their corps in the forthcoming campaign in Europe. During a late 1943 radio exchange between Marshall in Washington, DC and Eisenhower at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF) in England, Marshall made him aware that there were two seasoned division commanders available, Collins and MG Charles H. Corlett, both with combat experience in the Pacific Theater. Under Eisenhower's request, Collins left Washington, DC for England arriving in early February 1944.<sup>87</sup>

Collins reported to Eisenhower and Bradley at SHAEF immediately upon arrival to brief them on his experiences in the Pacific Theater. Throughout their discussion, Collins regularly emphasized aggressiveness and "Going for the high ground" while on the attack. Shortly into the discussion, Bradley turned to Eisenhower and stated, "He talks our language."<sup>88</sup> According to Collins, this conversation became one of the deciding factors validating his assignment to command VII Corps during the forthcoming invasion.<sup>89</sup> A combination combat success as a large-unit commander in the Pacific, and Marshall's endorsement, earned Collins the unique opportunity of commanding at a higher echelon in European Theater.<sup>90</sup> He assumed command of VII Corps on February 14, 1944 at forty-eight years of age, becoming the US Army's youngest corps commander during World War II.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldier's Story* (New York: Holt Publishing, 1951), 227-228.

<sup>88</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 179.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Bradley, *A Soldier's Story*, 228.

<sup>91</sup> Berlin, *U.S. Army World War II Corps Commanders*, 4.



## Capture of Cherbourg

I think it is possible that our coming operations [cross-channel attack and subsequent campaign in France] will bring to light some corps commander whose promotion to Army command might become obviously desirable. I am thinking of such prospects as Collins [VII Corps] . . .

—Eisenhower correspondence with Marshall, March 1944

Operation Overlord began on June 6, 1944 with the Allied invasion of Normandy to defeat occupying German forces and liberate France. The initial mission for Collins' VII Corps was to land forces on Utah Beach and capture the port town of Cherbourg.<sup>92</sup> It was during the capture of Cherbourg where Collins performed the aggressive forward leadership style that he felt was essential with large-unit combat command, "The real fellows are the ones that get up front . . . where the critical area is . . . is where the commander has to be."<sup>93</sup> During the capture of Cherbourg, Collins again led from the front, intuitively understood situations, visualized the necessary solutions, and directed his forces to achieve desired results.

Upon landing on Utah Beach, Collins' plan for VII Corps was to build combat power, then drive northwest between the Merderet and Douve Rivers towards Cherbourg with the 4th, 9th, and 90th Infantry Divisions, while the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions blocked potential enemy counterattacks from the south (fig. 2).<sup>94</sup> However, after landing on Utah beach the German forces identified Cherbourg's importance to the Allies, and attempted to disrupt advances towards the port town.<sup>95</sup> Similar to Guadalcanal, Collins swiftly displayed keen aggressiveness by

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<sup>92</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City: Double Day & Company, Inc., 1948), 244.

<sup>93</sup> J. Lawton Collins, "Leadership at Higher Echelons," *Military Review* 70, no. 5 (May 1990), 40. This article contains a speech Collins delivered to the CGSC on April 15, 1949.

<sup>94</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 202-203.

<sup>95</sup> Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 96.

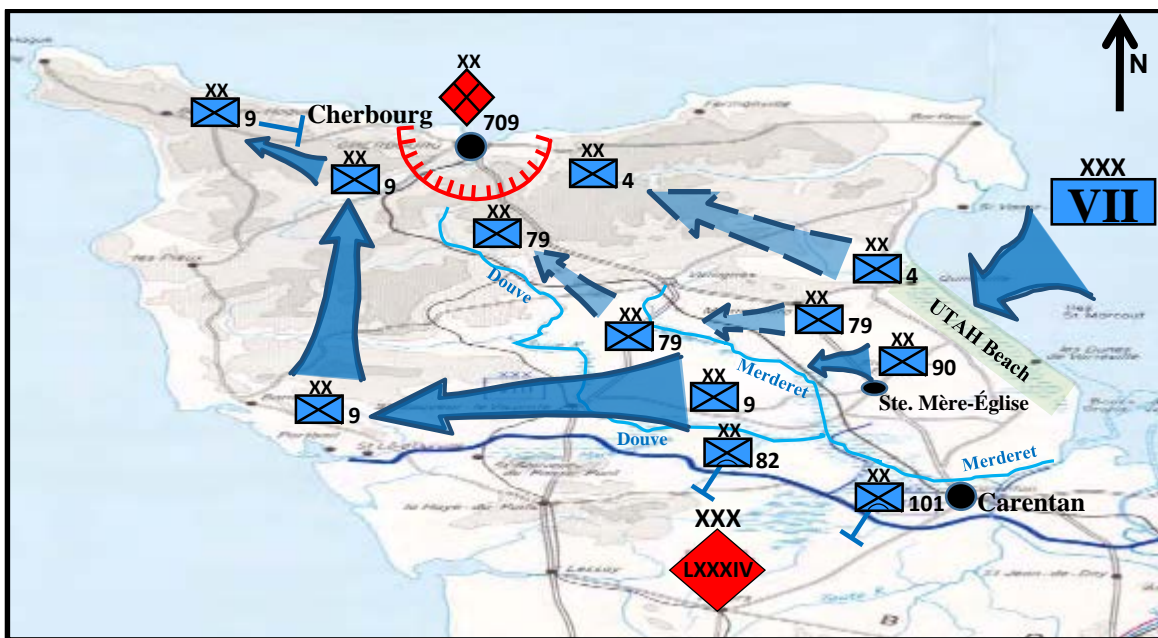


Figure 2. Cotentin Peninsula, VII Corps Capture of Cherbourg, June 8 - July 1, 1944.

Source: Adapted from Gordon A. Harrison, *United States Army in World War II: The European Theater of Operations, Cross-Channel Attack* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1993), Map XXIV.

physically moving forward to direct VII Corps forces. As stated by historian Russell Weigley, “Collins’ style of corps command was one of highly personal leadership, the corps chieftain close to the front, hastening by scout car from one division, regiment, or battalion to another to solve problems directly and to urge everybody forward.”<sup>96</sup> Collins’ boldness and forward leadership style would prove significant for VII Corps’ success during the capture of Cherbourg.

On June 6, the 82nd Airborne Division, led by MG Ridgway, parachuted in behind the Utah Beach and seized Ste. Mère-Église to prevent German counterattacks along VII Corps’ western flank.<sup>97</sup> On the morning of June 7, Collins moved forward to MG Raymond O. Barton’s

<sup>96</sup> Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants*, 99.

<sup>97</sup> Gordon A. Harrison, *United States Army in World War II. The European Theater of Operations, Cross-Channel Attack* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1993), 289.

4th Infantry Division command post to receive an update of the current situation from his corps' main effort.<sup>98</sup> Upon entering Barton's command post, Collins spotted a young officer from the 82nd Airborne Division with a message from Ridgway urgently requesting support to defend against an imminent attack from a German armor column moving south from Cherbourg towards Ste. Mère-Église.<sup>99</sup>

Barton's 4th Infantry Division had the 746th Tank Battalion attached, but he was hesitant to release additional combat power due to his division's slow advance.<sup>100</sup> Collins quickly overrode Barton's decision and directed him to attach a task force from the 746th Tank Battalion under Ridgway's control to confront the enemy counterattack. Collins' forward command style facilitated his ability with making demanding decisions during times of stress, which proved crucial as the 746th Task Force linked up with the 82nd Airborne Division just in time to disrupt the German counterattack. Furthermore, the 746th Task Force splintered the German attack into isolated groups forcing their immediate retrograde back towards Cherbourg.<sup>101</sup> Collins' forward presence and judgment proved essential for VII Corps units as they continued establishing a beachhead, and prepared for the assault to capture Cherbourg.

Bradley and his First Army staff always found a great deal of optimism and drive when visiting Collins and VII Corps during their battlefield circulation across Normandy. Bradley's aide de camp, Chester Hansen, specifically noted in his diary that Collins was very "independent, vigorous, heady, capable, and full of vinegar."<sup>102</sup> Bradley, realizing that he needed to make some

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<sup>98</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 202-203.

<sup>99</sup> Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 97.

<sup>100</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 203.

<sup>101</sup> Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 97.

<sup>102</sup> Chester B. Hansen Diaries, USAMHI (June 18, 1944), quoted in Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 98.

headway in the Cotentin Peninsula, recognized Collins' skill set as a commander and insisted that he isolate the peninsula to prevent reinforcement of Cherbourg. With Bradley's guidance, Collins adjusted his plan and moved west to cut off the Cotentin Peninsula before attacking north to seize Cherbourg. Bradley remained in close contact with all his corps commanders. However, he held Collins in higher regard regularly deferring to his requests, and allowing him to fight the fight his own way.<sup>103</sup> According to former soldier and historian Charles MacDonald, "Collins was a dynamic, driving personality whose opinions often exerted more than the normal influence at the next higher level of command."<sup>104</sup>

On June 13, due to the 90th Infantry Division failing to accomplish its initial objectives, Collins relieved their commander, Brigadier General (BG) Jay W. MacKelvie, along with two of his regimental commanders.<sup>105</sup> Significant issues with the 90th Infantry Division were inadequate training combined with a lack of effective leadership. The historian Max Hastings portrays Collins' command style as an enthusiastic leader who expected the absolute best from his subordinates, and "he sacked officers of any rank who failed to match his standards."<sup>106</sup> This unfortunate situation required Collins to adjust the VII Corps plan of attack. So on June 14, he maneuvered the reliable 9th Infantry Division around the 90th, making them the VII Corps main effort, and continued the western advance to cut off the Cotentin Peninsula (fig. 2).<sup>107</sup> With this

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<sup>103</sup> Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 98.

<sup>104</sup> Charles B. MacDonald, *United States Army in World War II: The European Theater of Operations, The Siegfried Line Campaign* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1993) 23.

<sup>105</sup> Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, 403.

<sup>106</sup> Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 162.

<sup>107</sup> Peter R. Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941-1945* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1999) 144.

change in the 90th Infantry Division's leadership, the unit retired back towards Utah Beach and transferred over to MG Troy H. Middleton's VIII Corps. Collins then requested the 79th Infantry Division from Bradley to maintain VII Corps' increased operational tempo.<sup>108</sup>

The VII Corps attack now had the 4th Infantry Division attacking north, while the 9th Infantry and 82nd Airborne Divisions advanced west to cut off the Cotentin Peninsula. Units of VII Corps soon discovered that rugged hedgerow terrain severely restricted maneuver. The Cotentin bocage country was some of the thickest and most difficult terrain to negotiate, but Collins' recent experiences at Guadalcanal prepared him to confront this obstacle. Moreover, the Germans failed to reposition fresher units forward to counter the VII Corps advance across the peninsula.<sup>109</sup>

With his intuitive feel for the battlefield, Collins sensed the time had come to leverage risk and hasten the western advance across the Cotentin Peninsula. Based on his understanding of the enemy and terrain, Collins assumed prudent risk by ordering his divisions to maneuver in frontal assaults of two regiments abreast with exposed flanks. He based this risk on his recent experiences in the South Pacific jungles knowing that an enemy with poor communications and few tanks could not effectively exploit these exposed flanks.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, by June 18 the VII Corps had cut off the Cotentin Peninsula, and positioned its units north to assault the isolated German forces defending Cherbourg (fig. 2).<sup>111</sup>

Collins aligned his Cherbourg assault force from east to west along the Cotentin Peninsula with the 4th Infantry, 79th Infantry, and 9th Infantry Divisions (fig. 2). As VII Corps

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<sup>108</sup> Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 99.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Williamson Murray, "Overlord," *America at War*, edited by Calvin L. Christman (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 385.

initiated their assault on June 19, Bradley attached the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, along with the 90th Infantry Division to Middleton's VIII Corps to establish a southern defensive front preventing the German *LXXXIV Corps* from reinforcing Cherbourg.<sup>112</sup> Collins emphasized speed for the Cherbourg assault to maximize his offensive advantage against the fragmented German defenses.<sup>113</sup> He used the untested 79th Infantry Division to fix German forces in the center while his most combat experienced units, the 4th and 9th Infantry Divisions, attacked the German's eastern and western defensive flanks. With the 79th Infantry Division facing its first combat since arriving in Normandy, an anxious Collins closely followed their assault to ensure mission execution.<sup>114</sup>

By June 21, VII Corps closed in and isolated Cherbourg. Collins planned a methodical combined arms siege consisting of a massive aerial bombardment along with naval gunfire support prior to a ground assault from various directions with his three infantry divisions.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, Collins attempted a similar approach as with the Gifu strongpoint at Guadalcanal by trying to persuade the Germans to capitulate before attacking. VII Corps staff created and delivered a multilingual broadcast on the evening of June 21 calling for the German commander, General Karl Wilhelm von Schlieben, and his soldiers to surrender or face immediate annihilation.<sup>116</sup> With Adolph Hitler ordering the defense of Cherbourg under all circumstances,

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<sup>112</sup> United States Army, *Mission Accomplished*, 21.

<sup>113</sup> Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, 416.

<sup>114</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 217.

<sup>115</sup> United States Army, *Mission Accomplished*, 21.

<sup>116</sup> United States Army Command and General Staff College. *Battle Analysis: D-Day Cherbourg, Course P651, Vol. 1, Part 3* (Fort Leavenworth: CGSC Printing Officer, 1987), 5-7. This volume contains a copy of the VII Corps After Action Review on the Capture of Cherbourg and the Cotentin Peninsula, US Army (June 6-July 1, 1944).

von Schlieben ignored VII Corps' ultimatum and prepared to defend at all costs.<sup>117</sup> For Collins, this situation was eerily similar to his experience a year and a half earlier with the Japanese strongpoint at the Gifu. Knowing this he prepared multiple preliminary attacks to weaken the objective before assaulting the strongpoint defense.

VII Corps began reducing the objective beginning on June 22 with the largest Allied aerial bombardment since the Normandy Invasion. The overwhelming effects of the preparatory aerial bombardment combined with indirect fires had significant physical and psychological effects on the German defenders. From June 22-27, the 4th, 9th, and 79th Infantry Divisions methodically reduced the German defenses. Anticipating that von Schlieben may attempt to retreat northwest and make a final stand in the town of Cape de la Hague, Collins ordered MG Eddy's 9th Infantry Division to defend the area northwest of Cherbourg (fig. 2).<sup>118</sup> The Germans put up stubborn resistance yet capitulated on July 1.

Led by an aggressive and intuitive Collins, the VII Corps capture of Cherbourg was the Allies only immediate success in the opening month of Operation Overlord. Furthermore, the seizure of Cherbourg captured General von Schlieben, over 39,000 German prisoners, secured a vital port, and VII Corps controlled the entire Cotentin Peninsula.<sup>119</sup> From Utah Beach to the capture of Cherbourg, Collins effectively used terrain, firepower, combined arms maneuver, and leveraged risk to maintain a position of relative advantage and defeat the German defenders. Eisenhower later described Collins' performance: "Collins had conducted against [Cherbourg] a relentless offensive and as a result of the operation justified his nickname Lightning Joe."<sup>120</sup> The

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<sup>117</sup> Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack*, 414.

<sup>118</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 220.

<sup>119</sup> United States Army, *Mission Accomplished*, 21.

<sup>120</sup> Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 260.

capture of Cherbourg was a decisive exhibit of effective large-unit command. In the coming weeks, Collins would demonstrate a mastery of large-unit command during Operation Cobra.



### **Battlefield Genius: Collins' Mastery of Large-Unit Command**

The commander must have a keen analytical mind to solve the problems that are constantly facing him. My concept . . . was the ability to adjust oneself to unforeseen circumstances.

—Collins speech to the Command and General Staff College, April 15, 1949

#### **Operation Cobra “Breakthrough”**

By mid-July, the Allied offensive quickly became a slow grinding advance in Normandy. The sole highlight of Operation Overlord had been VII Corps' capture of Cherbourg. Americans in the western sector faced the challenges of restrictive terrain consisting of bocage and narrow roads, whereas British forces in the eastern sector had accomplished little due to the German ability of repositioning armored forces to reinforce their eastern defenses.<sup>121</sup> With actions at a deadlock, Eisenhower tasked Bradley with planning a breakthrough operation. By July 10, Bradley developed a plan called Operation Cobra. As the senior officer responsible, Bradley selected Collins and his VII Corps as the operation's main effort with the mission of breaking through the German defenses.

Operation Cobra's primary objective was to break through the German defenses, and capture the deep-water ports along the Brittany coast. Accomplishing this would provide the Allies with the necessary foundation to facilitate a larger buildup and sustainment of forces needed to advance east and defeat Germany.<sup>122</sup> With the breakthrough being the decisive operation necessary to maintain an offensive against the Germans, Bradley selected Lightning Joe

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<sup>121</sup> Allan R. Millett, Peter Maslowski, and William B. Feis, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States from 1607 to 2012* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 423.

<sup>122</sup> Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 137.

Collins to lead the mission.<sup>123</sup> Operation Cobra became the first major event where the confident and bold Collins displayed his *coup d'oeil* revealing a mastery of large-unit command.

Bradley had admired Collins and his aggressive leadership style since their service together during the capture of Cherbourg. Both officers' leadership styles contrasted yet complimented each other quite well. Bradley, known for his cool, calm, and collected demeanor, and Collins, "the powerhouse ready to drive through," were, as described by Bradley's aide Hansen, the ideal combination for leading Operation Cobra.<sup>124</sup> Martin Blumenson closely described their connection with the Operation Cobra breakthrough plan as, "[Bradley] who conceived it, and [Collins], who executed it."<sup>125</sup> Together they had a great working relationship for planning Operation Cobra. Bradley formed the overall design of the operation and regularly sought Collins for his suggestions, and or modifications to the plan.<sup>126</sup>

Bradley's First Army and Collins' VII Corps staffs conducted effective collaborative planning for Operation Cobra. This partnership facilitated various recommendations and adjustments proposed by Collins for the overall plan. First, with Bradley selecting the line of departure as the east to west horizontal running road between the towns of St. Lô and Périers,<sup>127</sup> Collins recommended the front between towns Marigny and St. Gilles as the breakthrough objective (fig. 3). By seizing Marigny and St. Gilles with infantry, VII Corps would control the road network south, enabling Collins to exploit the breakthrough with his armored forces.

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<sup>123</sup> Bradley, *A Soldier's Story*, 332.

<sup>124</sup> Chester B. Hansen Diaries, USAMHI (18 June 1944), quoted in Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 149.

<sup>125</sup> Martin Blumenson, *United States Army in World War II: The European Theater of Operations, Breakout and Pursuit* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1961), 213.

<sup>126</sup> Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 149.

<sup>127</sup> Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1983), 339.

Second, Collins persuaded Bradley to reassign the 4th Infantry Division from VIII Corps for the operation to strengthen his combat power for the breakthrough and exploitation phases. Finally, he reinforced the motorized 1st Infantry Division with Combat Command (CC) B from the 3rd Armored Division, and designated them as the VII Corps' main effort.<sup>128</sup>

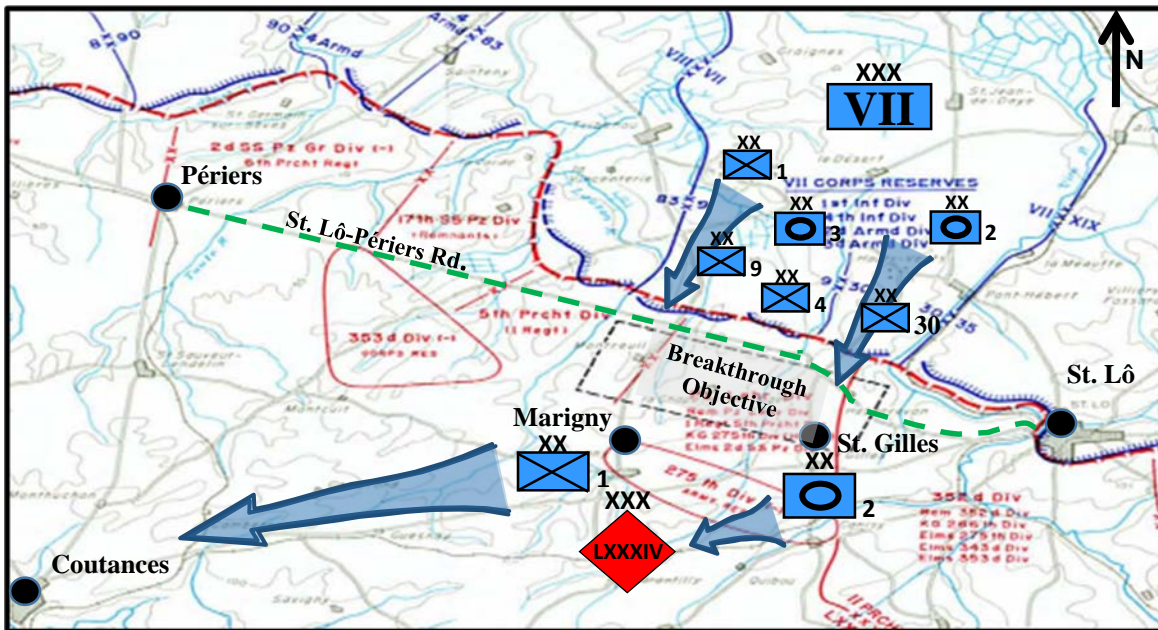


Figure 3. Normandy, Operation Cobra Breakthrough, July 24-27, 1944.

Source: Adapted from Martin Blumenson, *United States Army in World War II: The European Theater of Operations, Breakout and Pursuit* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1961), Map IV.

Collins' overall plan aligned his breakthrough divisions along three avenues of approach heading south consisting of the 9th Infantry Division to the west, the 4th Infantry Division in the center, and the 30th Infantry Division on the east. His exploitation forces in reserve were the 1st

<sup>128</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 233-235; Kent Roberts Greenfield, Robert R. Palmer, and Bell I. Wiley, *United States Army in World War II: The Army Ground Forces, The Organization of Ground Combat Troops* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1987), 323. Armored Divisions would divide into sub-headquarters under a brigadier general known as "Combat Commands." These Combat Commands were normally regimental sized forces consisting of combined arms elements; (tank battalion, armored infantry battalion, and armored field artillery battalion), task-organized for specific tactical missions.

Infantry Division, and the 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions (fig. 3). The 1st Infantry Division was tasked with attacking southwest towards the town of Countances. The remainder of the 3rd Armored Division would take an indirect route towards Countances, link up with the 1st Infantry Division, and together they would exploit German forces along VII Corp's western boundary, while the 2nd Armored Division exploited along the eastern boundary.<sup>129</sup>

Operation Cobra was to commence on July 24 beginning with a concentrated aerial bombardment from the Eighth Air Force, followed by VII Corps' breakthrough ground assault. Heavy overcast skies causing inadequate aircrew visibility delayed the operation for twenty-four hours. This notification did not reach all of the airbases in England in sufficient time to hold back all of the Allied bombers. This mishap led to a small amount of bombs dropped near the objective area. This premature bombing raid was only enough to alert German forces of a forthcoming attack near the town of St. Lô. A few of the bombs fell short of the objective area striking some of Collins' forward units causing friendly casualties. Furthermore, a bombing raid not followed up with a ground attack alerted German commanders to thin their lines in vicinity of the St. Lô-Périers road, and reposition additional troops south of the breakthrough objective (fig. 3).<sup>130</sup>

July 25 began with another large Allied aerial bombardment against German defensive lines, and again a few bombs fell short of the objective striking Collins' forward assault units. This bombing mishap caused VII Corps' attack to get off to a sluggish start. However, by late afternoon VII Corps units successfully fought through gaps in the scattered German defense. Additionally, the failure of a German counterattack attempt led Collins to judge that the dispersed enemy defenses lacked depth and were susceptible to flanking.<sup>131</sup> By assessing the battle in a

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<sup>129</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 235.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>131</sup> Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 155.

glance, his intuition visualized actions that needed execution.<sup>132</sup> It was at this point when Collins leveraged risk and ordering an attack the following morning.

Collins realized that the July 24 bombing raid forewarned the Germans to disperse their forces, and withdrawal their main defensive line further south of the objective area. He then visualized that a breakthrough and exploitation attempt needed to occur before the enemy could consolidate and sufficiently reposition its forces.<sup>133</sup> With a portion of the Allied bombardment falling short and striking both the 4th and 9th Infantry Divisions, Collins recognized that his breakthrough forces needed time to consolidate before they could re-attack the objective. Bradley rescheduled additional air strikes to begin on the morning of July 26 to attempt the breakout plan for a third consecutive day, but had limited resources due to the previous two days of heavy bombing raids.

Collins knew if given the opportunity German forces could establish another line of defense to potentially fix and fatally congest the avenues of approach.<sup>134</sup> Based on this understanding, Collins skillfully performed the fundamentals of command he had lectured about at the Army War College: “Commanders . . . must be prepared . . . to go to the spot of difficulty . . . and make the necessary modification of plans to meet the unforeseen. Only [then] can we make our concentration plans come true.”<sup>135</sup> After assessing the situation on the afternoon of July 25, Collins maneuvered the 2nd Armored Division forward to attack on his left flank, and directed the 1st Infantry Division with CCB to attack on his right flank.<sup>136</sup> As Collins reflected on this

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<sup>132</sup> Everett C. Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principle in the Space and Information Age* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 140.

<sup>133</sup> Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants*, 155.

<sup>134</sup> Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 246.

<sup>135</sup> J. Lawton Collins, “The Concentration of Large Forces” (lecture, Army War College, Washington, DC, 1 March 1940).

<sup>136</sup> Robert M. Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm: The Evolution of Operational Warfare*

situation he asserted that, “Conditions are going to vary and the commander has to make spot decisions to keep his units rolling.”<sup>137</sup> With this adjustment, Collins ordered both of VII Corps’ previously assigned exploitation forces to move forward and conducted the breakthrough attack towards Marigny and St. Gilles beginning on the morning of July 26 (fig. 3).<sup>138</sup> As proclaimed by Weigley, this decision “Helped stamp him as the most capable American corps commander in the European theater of operations.”<sup>139</sup>

Collins seized the initiative by directing his exploitation forces forward, not allowing the Germans time to reorganize and establish another defensive line.<sup>140</sup> This decision enabled VII Corps units to penetrate German defenses, achieve the breakthrough, and begin the exploitation phase. Along the west, the 1st Infantry Division with CCB from the 3rd Armored Division, captured Marigny and continued steady progress south towards Coutances. Along the east, the 2nd Armored Division quickly seized St. Gilles pushing German forces further south of the objective (fig. 3). Convinced that the German defenses were crumbling, Collins again assumed prudent risk by emphasizing speed over caution and ordering the attacks to continue throughout the night and into July 27.<sup>141</sup> With VII Corps elements rapidly making progress south along each of Collins’ three avenues of approach, “this passionate, intolerant, impatient soldier had once

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(Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2004), 110.

<sup>137</sup> Collins, “Leadership at Higher Echelons,” 40.

<sup>138</sup> Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm: The Evolution of Operational Warfare*, 110.

<sup>139</sup> Russell F. Weigley, “Normandy to Falaise: A Critique of Allied Operational Planning in 1944,” *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art*, Michael D. Krause, Cody R. Phillips eds. (Fort McNair: US Army Center of Military History, 2005), 401.

<sup>140</sup> Bill Yenne, *Operation Cobra and the Great Offensive: Sixty Days that changed the course of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2004), 49.

<sup>141</sup> Steve Zaloga, *Operation Cobra, 1944: Breakout from Normand* (Oxford: Osprey Military, 2001), 45.

again demonstrated his outstanding qualities as a corps commander.”<sup>142</sup> With VII Corps conducting the majority of the fighting over the past three days, Bradley halted Collins’ advance, and brought in Middleton’s VIII Corps to complete the exploitation of German forces and capture Coutances.<sup>143</sup>

By July 31, Bradley’s First Army had broken through the German defenses, captured the city of Avranches, and pushed German forces out of Normandy, accomplishing all of Operation Cobra objectives. Most of First Army’s success was due to VII Corps completing the necessary breakthrough, followed by the rapid exploitation that did not allow German commanders to stabilize the front. Collins leveraged judicious risk by committing his exploitation forces on the morning of July 26, which ultimately became the key decision for Operation Cobra’s success.<sup>144</sup> Collins’ risky decision was a clear example of his *coup d’oeil*, which sensed opportunity and capitalized on offensive momentum to keep the German forces off balance.

Collins’ decision on July 25 was neither luck nor a gamble, but a leader properly justifying “chance.”<sup>145</sup> Clausewitz summarizes that, “During an operation decisions have usually to be made at once: there may be no time to review the situation or even to think it through.”<sup>146</sup> Chance is a part of the character of a commander that Clausewitz contends, “Constitutes the essence of military genius.”<sup>147</sup> Bradley supports this “military genius” adding how Collins

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<sup>142</sup> Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle of Normandy*, 265.

<sup>143</sup> Yenne, *Operation Cobra and the Great Offensive*, 54.

<sup>144</sup> D’Este, *Decision in Normandy*, 404.

<sup>145</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

brought a tested sense of judgment and audacity to the battlefield that made him “one of the most outstanding field commanders in Europe . . . without a doubt also the most aggressive.”<sup>148</sup>

Following the Operation Cobra breakthrough, Collins triumphantly led VII Corps during First Army’s exploitation of German forces through the liberation of France. By the fall of 1944, the Allied offensive had swept from the Normandy beaches through France and all the way to the West Wall or Siegfried Line along the Belgium-German border.<sup>149</sup> However, with Allied forces making its rapid advance towards Germany, logistical challenges began to slow their offensive tempo enabling the Germans to stiffen resistance.<sup>150</sup> Collins’ goal was to quickly advance through the West Wall by moving southeast around the German town of Aachen, and through a seventy-square-mile section of heavily wooded terrain known as the Hürtgen Forest.<sup>151</sup> For a man who emphasized that the most important aspects of a campaign were terrain, Collins failed to acknowledge this fundamental lesson by attempting to advance the VII Corps through the Hürtgen Forest.<sup>152</sup>

Collins’ concept was to maneuver around the town of Aachen and through the Hürtgen Forest to quickly penetrate the West Wall, and continue the advance into Germany. The Hürtgen Forest presented a dense growth of trees that reduced visibility to only a few yards, contained steep hills, small clearings for several villages, and mostly unimproved roads throughout. German forces withdrawn from France had quickly consolidated and established formidable defenses in

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<sup>148</sup> Bradley, *A Soldier’s Story*, 228.

<sup>149</sup> MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign*, 6.

<sup>150</sup> Gideon Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle: A History of American Intervention from World War I to Afghanistan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 59.

<sup>151</sup> MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign*, 37.

<sup>152</sup> Gerald Astor, “Battle of Hürtgen Forest,” *Weider History*, (June 12, 2006), accessed October 31, 2014, <http://www.historynet.com/battle-of-hurtgen-forest.htm>.



and around the Hürtgen Forest. The First Army, now commanded by Lieutenant General (LTG) Courtney Hodges, made continuous thrusts in an attempt to seize the Hürtgen Forest only to suffer 24,000 casualties in what was one of the longest and bloodiest battles of World War II.<sup>153</sup>

Bradley, commanding the 12th Army Group at this point, continued to push the First Army believing that the strong-minded Collins and his VI Corps could break through the West Wall defenses.<sup>154</sup> Collins defended First Army's persistence with attempting to capture the Hürtgen Forest and penetrate the West Wall, maintaining that "if we could break it, then we would [have a decisive advantage,]."<sup>155</sup> Collins further alluded in his autobiography that, "As I look back now after thirty-five years . . . the Hürtgen campaign looms as the toughest, most costly of the VII Corps' operations in Europe."<sup>156</sup>

Despite a rigorous fight in the Hürtgen Forest, Collins would again rise to the occasion with his *coup d'oeil* against the forthcoming German offensive in the Ardennes that history would term as the Battle of the Bulge. As highlighted by military historian Harold Winton, "If there was an ever-so-slight smirch on [Collins'] reputation lingering from the Hürtgen, it was erased by his fine performance in the Ardennes."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Gerald Astor, "Battle of Hürtgen Forest," *Weider History*, (June 12, 2006), accessed October 31, 2014, <http://www.historynet.com/battle-of-hurtgen-forest.htm>.

<sup>154</sup> Morelock, *Generals of the Ardennes*, 118.

<sup>155</sup> MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line*, 95.

<sup>156</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 278.

<sup>157</sup> Winton, *Corps Commander of the Bulge*, 344.

## Ardennes Counterattack

On December 16, 1944, the Germans conducted a counteroffensive through the Ardennes towards the Meuse River in an attempt to divide and destroy Allied forces, capture the port in Antwerp, Belgium, and end the war in the west through negotiation. This counteroffensive created an extensive bulge dividing the Allied force into two sectors. The northern sector contained Hodges' First Army, with Collins' VII Corps, and Field Marshall Montgomery's British 21st Army Group. The southern sector contained Bradley's 12th Army Group with LTG George S. Patton's Third Army. This German attack threatened to cripple Allied forces; however, under Collins' bold, aggressive, intuitive leadership and *coup d'oeil*, the Allied forces would defeat this counteroffensive.

With the bulge threatening to break 12th Army Group's lines of communication, Eisenhower temporarily attached Hodges' United States First Army under Montgomery's British 21st Army Group north of the bulge.<sup>158</sup> This command structure placed the confident and aggressive American officer Collins, under the cautious and restraint British commander Montgomery.<sup>159</sup> Montgomery recognized that he needed to organize a swift counterattack to halt German advances, and acknowledged that this effort required an aggressive corps commander to direct it.<sup>160</sup> Having an awareness of Collins' reputation during the capture of Cherbourg and the Operation Cobra breakout, "[Montgomery] had no doubt that Lightning Joe was his man for this mission."<sup>161</sup> He clearly stated that he wanted Collins to lead this specific mission, nor would

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<sup>158</sup> Winton, *Corps Commander of the Bulge*, 204; Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 282.

<sup>159</sup> Morelock, *Generals of the Ardennes*, 67.

<sup>160</sup> Hugh M. Cole, *United States Army in World War II: The European Theater of Operations, The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge* (Washington, DC: Officer of the Chief of Military History, 1965), 427.

<sup>161</sup> Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 191.

entertain any other names.<sup>162</sup> After nominating Collins to spearhead the counteroffensive, Montgomery attached MG Harmon's 2nd Armored Division to Collins' VII Corps.

A little over a week into the enemy offensive, elements of the German *LVIII Corps* began consolidating approximately twenty-five to thirty miles east of the Meuse River near the Belgium towns of Marche and Hotton (fig. 4). This became the location where the German army prepared for subsequent attacks to push Allied forces further west across the Meuse River. As First Army's right flank, Collins established his VII Corps along a fifty-mile defensive front with positions east of Hotton running west to the Meuse River containing the 3rd Armored, 84th Infantry, and 2nd Armored Divisions on line, with the 75th Infantry Division in reserve (fig 4).<sup>163</sup> On December 23,

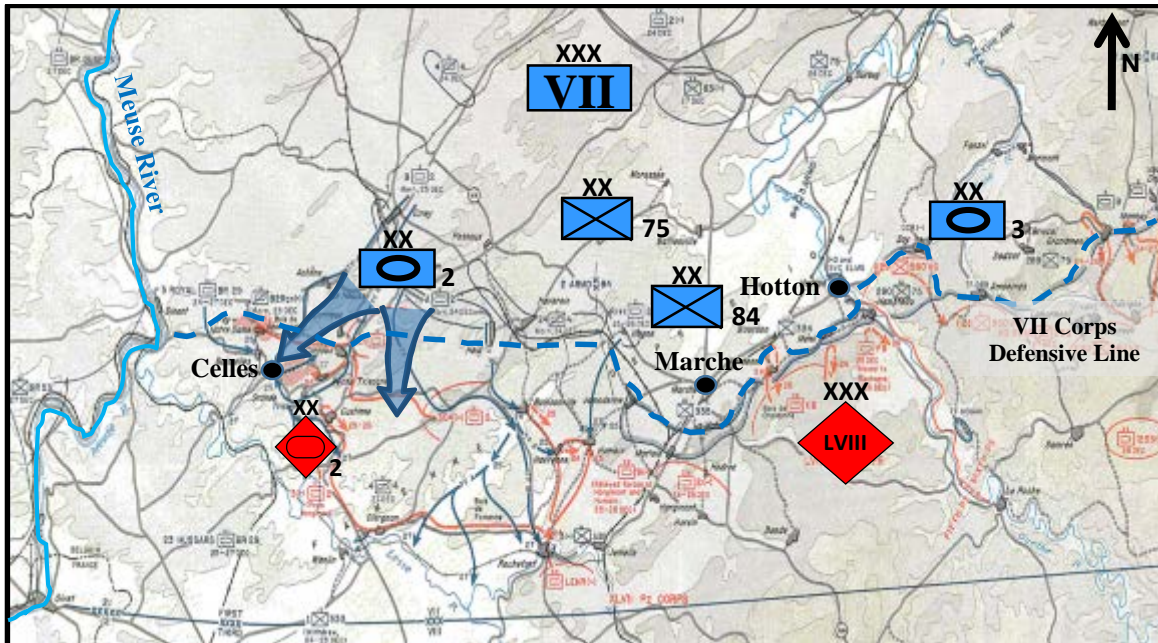


Figure 4. Ardennes, VII Corps Counterattack, December 23-27, 1944.

Source: Adapted from Hugh M. Cole, *United States Army in World War II: The European Theater of Operations, The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge* (Washington, DC: Officer of the Chief of Military History, 1965), Map VIII.

<sup>162</sup> Cole, *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge*, 427.

<sup>163</sup> United States Army, *Mission Accomplished*, 44.

the 84th Infantry Division began reporting significant German activity west of Marche. With VII Corps units in place for a solid defensive stand, Collins took the initiative by preparing a potential counterattack against the Germans before they could launch their planned assault. With this in mind, he ordered the vigorous Harmon and his 2nd Armored Division to prepare an attack in vicinity of Celles to prevent the German advance towards the Meuse River (fig. 4).

With an increase of enemy activity, Collins spent December 24 making his typical rounds to each division headquarters to gain a full understanding of the situation. Knowing he would be away from the VII Corps' headquarters for an extended period, he charged his artillery commander, BG Winston Palmer, with assumption of command throughout his absence. It was during Collins' battlefield circulation when events at higher headquarters took a dramatic turn.

Montgomery felt that a German offensive would fail against the established Allied defensive front. Based on this, he informed Hodges to rescind orders for Collins' counterattack and give him the option of maintaining the defensive line.<sup>164</sup> Per Montgomery's request, Hodges' First Army headquarters sent the VII Corps orders releasing them from all offensive operations, with guidance to reinforce the right flank.<sup>165</sup> Hodges' instructions provided specific guidance stating, "Commanding General, VII Corps, is hereby authorized to use all force at his disposal to accomplish this job."<sup>166</sup> As Collins read the orders, it reminded him of the First Battle of the Marne about which he had lectured while serving as an instructor at the US Army Infantry School in 1927.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 271.

<sup>165</sup> United States Army, *Mission Accomplished*, 44.

<sup>166</sup> Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 273.

<sup>167</sup> Collins, *Lightning Joe*, 289.

During the First Battle of the Marne in 1914, General Alexander von Kluck received unexplainable orders from Helmuth von Moltke recalling his army to pull back after advancing across the Marne River. These unusual directions immediately ceded all gained initiative back to the French Army, and eliminated German expectations for a victory during the opening campaign of World War I.<sup>168</sup> Collins' keen understanding of military history enabled him to establish a distinct parallel with von Kluck's experience thirty years earlier. With opportunity at his grasp, complying with higher orders would potentially have adverse effects on the overall situation, and enable the Germans to maintain their offensive momentum. However, Montgomery's instructions to defend did not specify how to defend nor did they prohibit attacking.

Under vague orders, Collins aggressively seized the opportunity by directing Harmon's 2nd Armored Division to attack towards Celles (fig. 4). Winton precisely describes how Collins' keen intuition and assertive spirit, "demonstrated moral courage in explicitly choosing to defy his higher commanders' intent and in implicitly being willing to accept responsibility for the adverse results, should Harmon's attack go awry."<sup>169</sup> Winton's comments are similar to the two indispensable qualities which Clausewitz describes effective commanders must possess. "First, an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth; and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead."<sup>170</sup> Collins' decision to counterattack is a clear example of the daring and risky decisions that effective large-unit commanders make in combat environments. As depicted by Harmon, "Collins and I were both convinced that we had the enemy . . . ultimately Collins took it on his own shoulders to give me

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<sup>168</sup> Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 273-274.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>170</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 102.

authority to attack.”<sup>171</sup> Upon receiving Collins’ order to attack Harmon rejoiced, “The bastards [Germans] are in the bag!”<sup>172</sup>

Harmon divided his 2nd Armored Division into two elements, CCA and CCB, attacked, and enveloped the German advance halting their drive towards the Meuse River near Celles (fig. 4). Collins’ situational understanding, sound judgment, and aggressive decision-making, facilitated Harmon’s near double envelopment and annihilation of the German *2nd Panzer Division*. This action proved instrumental in the reversal of German fortunes in the Ardennes. Winton pronounced that, “we see in this pivotal decision . . . the mental acuity to perceive the situation correctly and come to an appropriate judgment.”<sup>173</sup> Collins’ *coup d’oeil* facilitated his ability to identify enemy weaknesses, and decisively take advantage of the opportunities presented by these weaknesses to gain positions of relative advantage over the enemy. With VII Corps’ aggressive actions from December 23-27, the German spearhead through the Ardennes was undoubtedly defeated. Considering the results, no higher Allied headquarters questioned Collins’ boldness with conducting the early counterattack on December 24 that ultimately defeated the German offensive.<sup>174</sup>

The Ardennes Counterattack was a solid display of effective large-unit command demonstrated by Collins. He capitalized on previous experiences in both the Pacific and European theaters, and prepared the VII Corps staff to function in his absence. This enabled Collins to circulate forward on the battlefield, develop situational understanding, maintain solid awareness of current events, and direct necessary actions during times of distress. As illustrated by

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<sup>171</sup> Ernest N. Harmon, Milton MacKaye, William R. MacKaye, *Combat Commander: Autobiography of a Soldier* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970), 237.

<sup>172</sup> Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 274.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>174</sup> Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants*, 536.

Clausewitz, “strength of character does not consist solely in having powerful feelings, but in maintaining one’s balance in spite of them.”<sup>175</sup> Collins’ decision to attack the German spearhead near the town of Celles demonstrated his *coup d’oeil* of clearly analyzing situations, and executing sound decisions to accomplish victory.

Collins aggressively led VII Corps throughout the Allied assault to eliminate the German counteroffensive in January 1945. By late February, VII Corps had assaulted across the Roer River and closed in along the Rhine River prior to capturing the German city of Bonn by early March. Collins and his VII Corps continued east during the final campaign, eventually linking up with the Soviet Red Army along the Elbe River in late April 1945. Together with the Soviet Red Army, they rejoiced in celebrating Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day) on May 8, 1945.<sup>176</sup> Collins remained in command of VII Corps until the unit deactivated on June 11, 1945 to return to the United States. Overall, he commanded VII Corps throughout the entirety of its combat service in World War II comprising 370 days.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 107.

<sup>176</sup> Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 357.

<sup>177</sup> United States Army, *Mission Accomplished*, 72.

## Conclusion

[Collins] was in command of the corps conducting the assault on the Normandy beaches and since that time his corps has been practically continuously in battle. He is a master of tactics and a dynamic leader. He has been faced again and again with difficult tactical situations but has never once failed to conduct his battles to the entire satisfaction of his army and army group leaders. He is . . . a real leader and a driver.

—Eisenhower correspondence with Marshall, April 11, 1945

The above correspondence between two of Collins' most influential superiors, Marshall and Eisenhower, provides a concise summary describing his mastery of command during World War II. This monograph outlined a portrait of Collins' career beginning at the end of World War I, through the interwar period until the end of World War II. It illustrates how a combination of the interwar US Army school system, mentorship from significant Army leaders, and combat experiences developed J. Lawton Collins into becoming one of the US Army's most effective large-unit commanders in World War II.

This monograph began by examining Collins' interwar professional military education and leadership development, along with mentorship and guidance he received from Marshall. It then transitioned into Collins' initial combat command experiences as the 25th Infantry Division commander at Guadalcanal. It depicts how his exceptional command record in the Pacific, along with Marshall's recommendations, assisted in his elevation to command VII Corps in Europe. Collins maximized this opportunity by leading VII Corps on the rapid capture of Cherbourg during Operation Overlord and establishing advantageous working relationships with his superior officers, Eisenhower and Bradley. Finally, it explored two essential qualities of Collins' leadership: tactical genius and *coup d'oeil*. Both were central to his success during Operation Cobra and in the Ardennes. Both examples clearly exhibit his mastery of large-unit command. Overall, this monograph described how Collins cultivated and practiced an effective command style, and applied sound leadership characteristics under difficult circumstances to become



“almost universally acclaimed as the most effective [large-unit] commander” during World War II.<sup>178</sup>

As a younger officer, Collins was self-assured, bold, aggressive, and intuitive leader who needed mentorship, education, and maturing. He improved his talents through thorough preparation as a student and instructor in the US Army school system. Completing both the infantry and field artillery company officer’s courses made Collins a multifaceted junior officer with sound leadership fundamentals, knowledge of capabilities and limitations with multiple weapon systems, and combined arms tactical maneuver. After serving four years as an instructor at the infantry school, Collins attended the two-year CGSS program where he completed “probably the most important” instruction for large-unit command during his school system tenure.<sup>179</sup> After briefly serving on large-unit staffs in the Philippines, Collins returned to the educational environment attending the Army Industrial and War Colleges. Collins remained as a faculty member at the War College where he lectured on large-units in combat. It was at both the CGSS and Army War College where Collins studied and codified the necessary skills required to command large-units in combat.

From 1921 to 1941, Collins spent sixteen years in the US Army school system as a student and instructor compared to only four years with the active force. Today’s army would consider this amount of schooling versus service in the active force as detrimental to creating effective commanders. The contemporary army places a heavier emphasis on professional experience as opposed to service in the educational environment. Collins is a unique example of an officer who greatly benefitted from his extended time in the educational environment. In a 1983 interview with Command and General Staff College (CGSC) students, Collins reflected on

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<sup>178</sup> Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 344.

<sup>179</sup> Schifferle, *America’s School for War*, 115.

the importance of the interwar US Army school system emphasizing that, “I’d give up a division before I’d give up one of our schools.”<sup>180</sup>

In addition to nurturing his leadership and decision-making attributes in the US Army school system, Collins came under the tutelage of Marshall while an instructor at the US Army Infantry School. Marshall groomed Collins to improve his critical thinking, problem solving, and development of innovative and creative solutions. His overall leadership and decision-making abilities progressed significantly under Marshall’s coaching and mentorship. Furthermore, Marshall’s endorsements quickly propelled Collins into command of large-units once the United States entered World War II.

Collins practiced the leadership fundamentals learned at the infantry school, combined with the terrain analysis, and combined arms employment techniques acquired from the field artillery school while commanding the 25th Infantry Division in Guadalcanal. His forward command style enabled him to make accurate assessments and decisions at the critical points of action. During Operation Overlord, Collins’ forward command presence, aggressiveness, analysis of the terrain, and intuition facilitated a swift capture of Cherbourg. Following the capture of Cherbourg senior commanding officers, Eisenhower and Bradley, recognized Collins’ distinguished combat command capabilities, and assigned VII Corps some of the most demanding missions.

*Coup d’oeil* separated Collins from his peer commanders during World War II. Gideon Rose describes this as “military officers, with their varying degrees of courage and talent and perception, work the odds on the battlefield” to achieve victory.<sup>181</sup> Collins displayed *coup d’oeil* during both Operation Cobra and in the Ardennes counterattack. Major Kenneth Hechler, author of VII Corps’ Operation Cobra history, wrote, “[Collins] not only made the final decisions but

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<sup>180</sup> Wade, “Conversations with General J. Lawton Collins,” 3.

<sup>181</sup> Rose, *How Wars End*, 287.

personally put together the jigsaw pieces which added up to the decisions.”<sup>182</sup> His aggressive forward leadership style, acceptance of prudent risk, and critical decision-making during both Operation Cobra and in the Ardennes, clearly demonstrated superlative mastery of large-unit command.

Collins’ senior commanders recognized him as being one of the best large-unit commanders during World War II. Eisenhower prepared a memorandum in February 1945 listing an order of merit of officers based on the value of their services rendered during World War II. He ranked Collins ninth on a list of great military leaders headed by Bradley, describing Collins as a “particularly fine [commanding general] in a battle; energetic, always optimistic, a leader.”<sup>183</sup> Likewise, on Bradley’s special rating of general officers he ranked Collins seventh on a list of nearly two-hundred leaders. Bradley specifically documented that, “His outstanding quality is his aggressiveness.”<sup>184</sup>

In summary, this monograph outlined how professional military education, mentorship from superior officers, and command experiences are invaluable assets in establishing effective large-unit commanders. Collins’ proficiency in leadership, combined arms tactics, and his extended knowledge of military history exemplifies the necessity for military leaders to learn, study, and practice their profession throughout their careers. Without his extended education,

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<sup>182</sup> Kenneth W. Hechler, “VII Corps in Operation ‘Cobra’” (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1945) quoted in Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants*, 149.

<sup>183</sup> Berlin, *U.S. Army World War II Corps Commanders*, 20; Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants*, 758. Eisenhower’s ranking of the top generals in Europe include (1) Omar N. Bradley; Carl A. Spaatz equal as the highest; (3) Walter B. Smith; (4) George S. Patton; (5) Mark W. Clark; (6) Lucian K. Truscott; (7) James H. Doolittle; (8) Leonard T. Gerow; (9) J. Lawton Collins; (10) Alexander M. Patch; (11) Courtney H. Hodges; among many others.

<sup>184</sup> Omar Bradley, Special Rating of General Officers (1 June 1945), Collins file, National Personnel Records Center, quoted in Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 357; Weigley, *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants*, 758. Bradley’s ranking of the top generals in Europe include (1) Smith; (2) Spaatz; (3) Hodges; (4) Elwood R. Quesada; (5) Truscott; (6) Patton; (7) Collins; (8) Gerow; (9) Clark; (10) Harold R. Bull; among many others.

Collins would not have been able to quickly understand situations, visualize valid solutions, and direct the necessary actions against a near-peer competitive enemy on the battlefield.

Collins had the unique experience of being one of only three US Army large-unit commanders to fight in both the Pacific and European Theaters during World War II. Allied victory in World War II owes a great deal of credit to the tactical American ground soldier. They were the individuals who left their blood, sweat, and efforts on battlefields throughout Europe and in the Pacific. As an effective large-unit commander, Collins implicitly ensured the linkage of the tactical sacrifices made by the soldiers on the ground to the strategic aims crafted by the senior commanders at the top.<sup>185</sup> It was well-educated and determined operational leaders like Collins, who led the US Army to victory during World War II.

### Implications

It is imperative for the contemporary US Army to properly educate and train sound operational leaders similar to J. Lawton Collins, in order to maintain the necessary assets for victory, as the United States faces uncertain future challenges. Experience is vital for effective operational level leadership, however, a combination of adequate levels of education and training are essential variables when cultivating a complete leader. The operational level of war is where the US Army collectively has the least amount of experience, and it “requires an active mind . . . which is open and curious, and . . . has more than simply technical competence.”<sup>186</sup> While the US Army traditionally places experience as the primary attribute measured when developing operational leaders, it must ensure a balanced combination of education and mentorship when

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<sup>185</sup> Wade, “Conversations with General J. Lawton Collins,” 7; Winton, *Corps Commanders of the Bulge*, 347.

<sup>186</sup> William Stofft, “Leadership at the Operational Level of War,” *On Operational Art*, edited by Clayton R. Newell and Michael D. Krause (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1994), 189-190.

constructing multi-faceted mid-level leaders. Former Army War College Commandant MG William A. Stofft described, “How to best prepare for leadership at the operational level is a blend of learning by education, training, and experience.”<sup>187</sup> Educational approaches similar to the ones implemented by Marshall at the US Army Infantry School—exposing leaders to military history, critical thinking, creative problem solving, and reflection—are crucial when developing effective operational leaders.

The US Army must also place an increased focus on professional mentorship when developing its operational leaders. Future US Army operational level leaders will greatly benefit from the guidance and grooming provided by its current operational level commanders. While this concept is not groundbreaking, Collins’ experience displays the powerful impact that effective mentorship can have in the development of operational level leaders and commanders.

Finally, operational leadership requires an all-inclusive understanding of war for commanders to make critical decisions and have the moral courage to see difficult decisions through execution. US Army operational level leaders must possess the intelligence, confidence, and creative thinking necessary to make difficult decisions. They must also have the audacity to stand by their decisions and ensure their directed actions achieve mission accomplishment. According to Stofft, “The crux of leadership at the operational level is reconciling tactical events with strategic aims.”<sup>188</sup> Operational level leaders must be comfortable with the art of decentralized command, and supervise the connection of actions made at the soldier level with achieving the objectives created by senior commanders. The principal take-away for the US Army is to establish and maintain effective training approaches ensuring it properly prepares its operational level leaders for a multitude of potential future conflicts.

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<sup>187</sup> Stofft, “Leadership at the Operational Level of War,” 191. Major General William A. Stofft served as the Commandant of the Army War College from 1991-1994.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 193.

**Appendix:**  
**J. Lawton Collins Biographical Timeline**

1896	Born May 1, New Orleans, Louisiana
1917	Graduated from United States Military Academy, West Point, New York
1918	Promoted to temporary Major; Commands 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment
1919-1920	Post-World War I occupation duty in the Rhineland, Germany; Commands 3rd Battalion 18th Infantry Regiment
1920	Reverted to Captain; Commands Company L, 8th Infantry Regiment
1921	Marries Gladys Easterbrook on July 15
1921-1925	Instructor, United States Military Academy, West Point, New York
1925-1927	Attended the US Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia and the US Army Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma
1927-1931	Instructor, US Army Infantry School, Fort Benning, Georgia
1931-1933	Attended the Command and General Staff School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; promoted to Major in August 1932
1933-1936	Served in the Philippines as Brigade Executive Officer of the 23rd Brigade, and as Operations and Intelligence Officer of the Philippine Division
1936-1938	Attended the Army Industrial College and Army War College, Fort Humphreys, Washington, DC
1938-1940	Instructor, Army War College, Fort Humphreys, Washington, DC
1940	Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in June; Served on Secretariat, Army General Staff
1941	Promoted to Colonel in January; Chief of Staff, VII Corps, Birmingham, Alabama-participated in Tennessee, Arkansas, and Louisiana maneuvers
1941-1942	Chief of Staff, Hawaiian Department
1942	Promoted to Brigadier General in February; promoted to Major General and assumes command of the 25th Infantry Division in May
1942-1943	Commander, 25th Infantry Division, Pacific Theater
1944	Assumes command of VII Corps in February
1944-1945	Commander, VII Corps, European Theater

1945	Promoted to Lieutenant General in April
1945-1947	Chief of Public Information, War Department
1947-1949	Deputy and Vice Chief of Staff, US Army
1948	Promoted to General in January
1949-1953	Chief of Staff, US Army
1953-1956	United States representative on NATO's Military Committee and Standing Group
1954-1955	Special representative of United States in Vietnam with rank of ambassador
1956	Retired from the US Army on March 31
1956-1957	Director and vice chairman, President's Committee for Hungarian Refugee Relief
1957-1969	Vice chairman, board of directors, Pfizer International Inc. and member, board of directors, Charles Pfizer and Co., Inc.
1969-1987	Consultant, Pfizer International Inc.
1987	Died September 12, Washington, DC

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